

skin diver



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The Underwater World of Santa Cruz Island

PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



One of the most exciting aspects of Santa Cruz Island is that the water surrounding the island is still unspoiled by civilization. Marine life is plentiful and such animals as sea lions (top), treefish and garibaldi (left) are common. Above, a diver surfaces through the beautiful kelp beds to board one of the dive boats.

BY JIM COOLURIS

Just 18 miles from the California coastline lies Santa Cruz Island with surrounding waters that are still unspoiled by civilization. For boat owners, the cruising and diving possibilities are unlimited, depending on the type of boat and its cruising range.

Smuggler's Cove, a popular anchorage for boats, is located on the southeast end of the island. This cove is only fair for diving because the bottom is mostly sand. But the west tip of the cove is rather rocky with kelp—a good diving and snorkeling area.

About one mile west of Smuggler's is a large area known as Yellowbanks, easily distinguished by the large yellow bluffs on the island. The huge kelp beds and offshore reefs provide an excellent diving area.

I remember one particular dive at Yellowbanks. It was a very warm October day and we were anchored in the heavy kelp bed with 90 feet of water below us. We looked down the anchor line and could visually follow it down a long distance, indicating good visibility. We suited up, entered the water and penetrated the massive kelp forest to the bottom. We could easily see 60 to 70 feet. Masses of blacksmiths were swimming above the reefs. Clusters of strawberry anemones covered the rocks like a red velvet rug. I spotted a huge lingcod and tried to get a macro shot of his head, but he spooked and swam between my legs. Settling down, I started taking pictures of rock scallops, starfish and other non-moving objects, but a nosy treefish peered out from a small crevice. After awhile, the fish decided that the grotesque framer on the front of my camera wouldn't hurt him, so I started exposing film as if he were the last of his kind. About that time, my buddy started yanking on my fin. He had found a nudibranch and wanted me to see it. The treefish was beginning to get annoyed with my strobe, so I followed my buddy. Numerous abs were attached to the rocks surrounding the nudibranch, so as I photographed the delicate beauty, my buddy chose several of the larger abs and stowed them in his goodie bag.

Yellowbanks is a great area to dive when conditions permit. However, visi-

bility is not always good. I have dived here when the visibility was five feet and the current nasty. If the kelp is up, great! Otherwise, forget it. Abalone and lobster are plentiful, but you have to work pretty darn hard for them.

Five miles up the back side is Blue Banks. Here the cliffs are bluish-green. Offshore is a good rocky area which ends in a white sandy bottom at a depth of 50-60 feet. The reefs are blanketed with corynactis and the kelp covered reefs provide a good spot for abalone and lobster. Magnificent black sea bass can occasionally be seen swimming over the white sand which reflects off their huge bodies painting them silver. During the summer months, Blue Banks is home for many schools of mating squid. At this time the sandy areas in the deeper waters are covered with masses of squid egg cases.

A few miles west is Albert's Anchorage, a beautiful little cove that is popular for boaters anchoring overnight. A private Tahitian type dive camp used to be here, but following a few minor landslides, the management decided it best to close down after several successful years. Today, nothing is left to indicate that civilization once frequented the cove. As far as game is concerned, the area surrounding the cove is pretty well dived out, but near the rocky cliffs it is beautiful for U/W photography.

One of the best places to dive at Santa Cruz Island is Gull Island, a large rock over 200 yards out from the island. Sometimes there is a wild current, but this is a good rocky area extending for quite some distance. Lots of big abs and lobsters make this a popular place and divers have found blue coral here, too. Located six miles west of Albert's Anchorage, most charter boats usually require two and a half to three hours running time to get there, and the weather and water conditions are always quite unpredictable.

On the north side of Santa Cruz Island, west of San Pedro Point, lies Scorpion Anchorage. This is probably the most popular anchorage on the northeast end of the island and the diving is fair to good. An increasing number of boaters are becoming divers, so the popular anchorages do not offer the

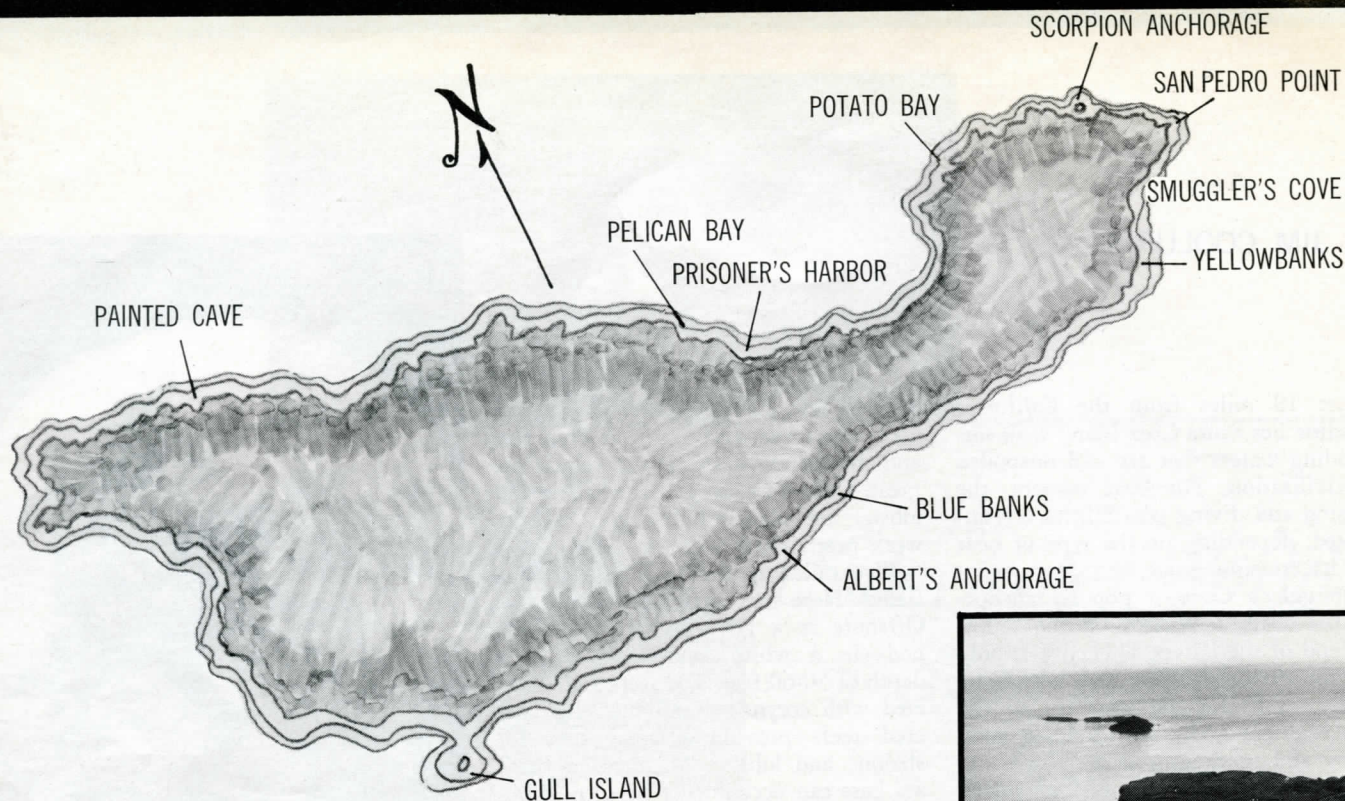


abundance of marine life that is found at other areas of the island.

One of my favorite places to dive at Santa Cruz is near Potato Bay. Inside the bay there is a good spot to anchor during the day, and toward the northwest end of this long narrow inlet is a sea lion rookery that abounds with barking sea lions sunning themselves on the rocks. Just outside the bay, about 200 yards, is a huge underwater rock known as Potato Rock. Rising from the sandy ocean floor at 85 feet, this monolith comes to within 15 feet of the surface.

One day Frank Naus and I were diving here to take pictures of nudibranchs and anemones. The visibility was about 50 feet—good, but not great. The east side of the rock drops off to 60 feet and the descent over the side gave us a feeling of falling through space. Frank settled on the bottom in the middle of a field of tube anemones; I went over a small ledge to 80 feet. Here I found a small cave at the base of the rock. I entered the cave only to find that it was about 12 feet deep. Frank motioned to me to look at my bubbles seeping out of the roof above.

On this great rock we saw many anemones and many species of nudibranchs. In a small area about three feet square we counted almost a dozen rock scallops. Encrusted on their shells were corynactis, anemones and barnacles.



Some even had smaller scallops attached to them. Big sheepshead seemed to follow us, sensing that we were friends. We were shooting only with our cameras, not spearguns. Although Frank brought his goodie bag to collect some tasty scallops for dinner, we tried not to disturb too much. We felt we were visitors in the underwater world and were not here to conquer or destroy. Our air supply low, we were forced to return to the surface and the boat.

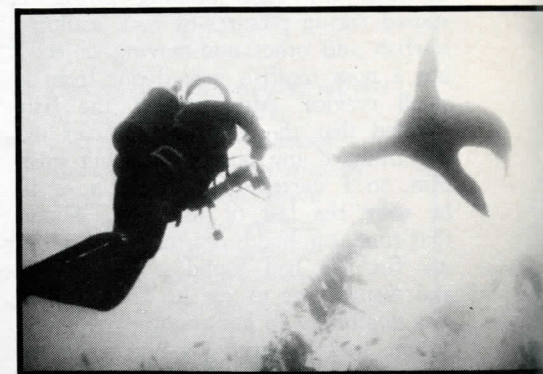
We decided to make a second dive to photograph the field of anemones and the cave. I wished that we were not encumbered by bulky tanks and decompression problems. Since this was our second dive to this depth, we could only spend a short time here. Cautiously we checked our decompression meters as we exposed film. Suddenly I spotted several large, fast-moving objects. Curious sea lions were swimming around us, then leaving us as quickly as they appeared. Our decompression meters had run into the red zone, so we ascended to about 30 feet to expose the balance of our film in shallow water. The sunlight felt good on our chilled bodies. Back on the boat, Frank and I were determined to visit this spot and dive it as regularly as possible.

Chinese Harbor, a huge bay about two and a half miles long, is located only a half mile west of Potato Bay. Most of

the area is sandy with halibut during the summer months. Angel sharks and California bat rays also abound here.

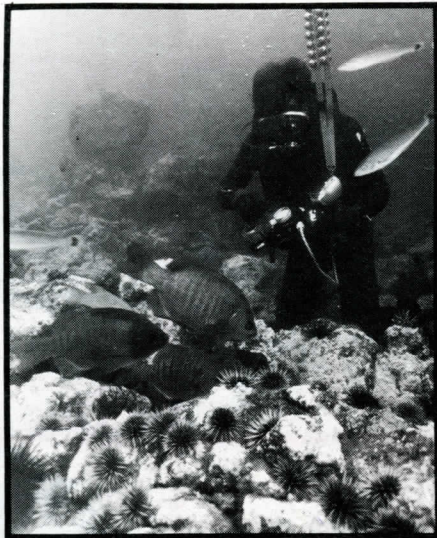
Quite a few popular anchorages are located west of Chinese Harbor. Prisoner's Harbor is aptly named because in the early 1800's Mexico used to import convicts to Santa Cruz Island and it was here that they were put ashore.

But the most popular place to anchor on the north side of Santa Cruz is Pelican Bay, a beautiful inlet with high cliffs on one side. The bottom is mostly sandy except around the sides of the inlet. About four years ago, while attending Brooks Institute of Photography, I made a night dive here. We were on the EMERALD out of Santa Barbara for our ocean assignments. After a barbecue steak dinner, it finally turned dark. We used bright surface powered lights that illuminated a huge area of the water. We paired up into buddy teams and two buddy teams were to be in the water at one time. I was in the second group and was getting anxious to dive. As soon as the first teams surfaced we calmly made our entries. Once in the water we could see about 20 feet using our lights. My buddy and I sank slowly to get used to the blackness of the water. Once on the bottom, we found it to be mostly sand with a few patches of kelp. I awkwardly backed into a kelp patch which, in the dark, can be quite



From the eastern end of Santa Cruz, divers can easily see the three small islands that comprise Anacapa Island. The center photo is an aerial view of Santa Cruz showing the entrance to the well-known, fascinating Painted Cave.

Santa Cruz Island is only 18 miles from Channel Islands Harbor and is the largest of California's Channel Islands—over 25 miles long with an average width of seven miles. The island itself is privately owned, but waters surrounding it provide divers with a fascinating variety of marine life.



spooky. All I knew was that long, stringy arms of some sort were engulfing me. I had not seen any kelp in the area, so I was startled. My buddy almost lost his mouthpiece, he was laughing so hard. We settled down and took pictures of each other in the strange darkness of the night water. As we surfaced, a school of squid visited the area, providing the other team with some great models. One of the divers got some fantastic footage of a spider crab catching and eating a squid. Back on the boat, I looked up at the surrounding cliffs to see them shimmering with the reflections of the glowing water. What a fantastic sight on a beautiful calm night in a secluded cove.

Near the west end of Santa Cruz is a well-known attraction called Painted Cave. The diving here is rather barren except for the many sea lions. Painted Cave is often compared to the Blue Grotto on the isle of Capri. Entering the cave by boat, cruiser or dinghy, one is surprised at the size of this enormous cavern. The ceiling is well over 125 feet high, with brilliant hues of red, orange and gold. Lights or flares really bring out the array of colors inside. A cruiser can penetrate about one-third of the way, but a dinghy can go over 600 feet into the cavern. While inside, the barking of the sea lions echoes from wall to wall, giving a feeling

of being in an unknown world. If you visit Santa Cruz Island, Painted Cave is one of the many highlights.

Santa Cruz Island is only 18 miles from Channel Islands Harbor, and it is the largest of California's Channel Islands. Over 25 miles long, with an average width of seven miles, Santa Cruz Island is privately owned. The larger portion of the island is owned by the Santa Cruz Island Company, and the smaller eastern portion is owned by the Gherini family. There are absolutely no public facilities on the island and the public is not permitted to land on the island without a prearranged permit. Even if a person does have a permit, no camping, eating or smoking is allowed. These rules are strictly enforced by deputized patrols on the island. If you want to visit Santa Cruz Island ashore, permits are available from Santa Cruz Island Company, Suite 1400, 615 South Flower St., Los Angeles, Calif. 90017. A landing fee is required. For the eastern section of the island, a permit must be obtained from Mr. Pier Gherini, 230 La Arcade Bldg., Santa Barbara, Calif. 93104. This permit is free. But to visit the underwater world of Santa Cruz Island, no permit is necessary.

The spring and fall months provide the best time of the year to dive at Santa Cruz Island. At these times the water is generally calm and the under-

water visibility is usually best. In the spring, the island is beautiful—green rolling hills with sparkles of blooming wild flowers. During the winter, the water visibility is poorer because of the storms, and in the summer, visibility is bad due to the massive amounts of plankton in the water.

If a group or club wants to dive at Santa Cruz Island, there are several dive boats available on a charter basis. Port Hueneme has several excellent boats available — the JEANNE and the SEA BEE. Information on these boats may be obtained by calling (805) 488-4715. Cisco Landing at Channel Islands Harbor has the SEA PACKER, DIABLO, WE SEVEN and the PAISANO. For charter information on these boats, call (805) 486-7346. In Santa Barbara, the popular dive boats, the EMERALD (805) 969-4651, and the HURRICANE (805) 969-4608 are regularly operating charter trips to Santa Cruz Island.

If you get a chance to dive at Santa Cruz, remember that the owners of the island require permits to land ashore, so please respect their wishes. They want to keep the island in its original state and do not want the island's natural beauty ruined by litter and vandalism. However, divers do not need to go ashore to enjoy the beauty and serenity of nature in the underwater world of Santa Cruz Island. >>>